

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



## Flood Risk Too High for Urquiza

*Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist*

Following the June 2008 floods when a levee broke along the Iowa River sending torrents of water out of its banks, Felipe Urquiza of Wapello, Iowa, knew floodwaters would always threaten his home and 13-acre farm that sit in the Iowa River floodplain in Louisa County in southeast Iowa.

With his home damaged beyond repair and cropland inundated by floodwaters, Urquiza decided to voluntarily retire his flood-prone cropland and enter it into a permanent easement. The land will be restored to deep-rooted permanent cover of wildlife habitat in 2010, and be allowed to flood naturally.

Safeguarding his family is a major reason Urquiza chose to move away from the Iowa River floodplain, where he lived for seven



*Felipe Urquiza stands near a sign indicating the easement boundary. NRCS is paying Urquiza fair market value to retire his flood-prone cropland through a conservation easement. The land will be restored to deep-rooted native vegetation.*

to get us out of there,” said Urquiza. “When we gathered our things and left, the water was about halfway up our tires – another hour and they would have had to rescue us by boat, or who knows?”

This wasn’t the first time the home flooded. “Our home was raised about four feet following the 1993 floods (by previous owners),” he said. “We were assured it wouldn’t flood again.”

The family home was destroyed this time, filled by four feet of water. It will be razed through a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) flood disaster program. “The (government) programs will help us buy a new property and possibly build a new house,” said Urquiza.

Urquiza is one of 35 Iowa landowners to enroll in the USDA’s Emergency Watershed

*Landowner Felipe Urquiza says this hayfield is the most flood-prone area of his land. It will be restored to native grasses and trees.*



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*Felipe Urquiza (left) stands with Louisa County District Conservationist Drew DeLang with USDA-NRCS. DeLang has worked with Urquiza throughout the easement process.*

Protection (EWP) Program's floodplain easement option through funding by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. This allows the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to acquire the land and fund the conservation restoration work. Urquiza and the other landowners in the program retain several rights to the property, including control of public access, and undeveloped recreational use such as hunting.

Statewide, private landowners voluntarily placed nearly 4,000 acres into the EWP program using ARRA funds, according to Monica Monk, easement programs coordinator for NRCS in Iowa. Urquiza's easement is just one of a handful in Levee District #11 in Louisa County, where a major levee broke. "These easements will help mitigate persistent downstream flooding on the Iowa River," said Monk. "Restoring floodplains to a natural state ensures riverine ecosystems function properly."

Those functions include conserving and improving fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, floodwater retention, groundwater recharge,

and open space; reducing long-term federal disaster assistance; and safeguarding lives and property from floods and erosion.

Urquiza has not decided how he will use the property, but he likes how the restoration work will create needed wildlife habitat. "I enjoy nature a lot, so I'd like to see the land look like it did before it was farmed," he said. "During harvest I saw all kinds of wild animals running for cover – maybe this can be a wildlife refuge."

Applications for the EWP floodplain easement program were submitted voluntarily and screened to ensure they met specific criteria before selection, such as the impact and connectivity of streams and floodplains, their proximity to wetlands and wildlife habitat, and the likelihood of generating jobs through restoration activities. These activities include, but are not limited to, removal of structures that impede or alter water flow; re-establishing natural vegetation; and restoring fish migration routes.

For more information about the ARRA of 2009 flood recovery, visit [www.recovery](http://www.recovery)